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# Examining Value, Measuring Engagement: A National Study of the Long-Term Outcomes of a Law Degree

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GALLUP®

# Examining Value, Measuring Engagement

A National Study of the Long-Term  
Outcomes of a Law Degree



  
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# Foreword

## A Message from AccessLex Institute

There was a time when earning a law degree was assumed to be a sure path to financial security and prestige. The ostensible trappings of the legal profession — power, access and wealth — made law school a popular higher education destination for people wanting to make money, change the world or simply “find themselves.” In those days, law school was relatively inexpensive, and jobs were plentiful. But rising tuition costs and the recessionary contraction of the legal job market have led to declines in the popularity of law school as questions about the value of a law degree have risen.

To learn more about how the value of a law degree is currently perceived, AccessLex Institute commissioned Gallup to conduct a study of law school graduates at various stages of their careers, as well as graduates in other disciplines. The study adopted a holistic conception of value, encompassing not only financial payoffs, but also well-being and professional engagement. We were interested in learning more about how the perceived value of the degree varied among people who graduated law school before, during and after the Great Recession. We also wanted more insight into how law school graduates’ experiences and perceptions compared with those of recipients of other higher education degrees. The study builds on our *Life After Law School* report by drawing from a more nationally representative sample of graduate and professional degree holders.

Several important themes from this report stand out — the most prominent being that the perceived value of a law degree remains high across all bachelor’s degree and advanced degree holders. Almost half of the survey respondents stated that a law degree was “very valuable.” This proportion was second only to a medical degree among degrees beyond the bachelor’s level. The findings also highlight the broad utility of a law degree. Law graduates were more likely than other degree holders to state that their studies helped prepare them for financial, legal and other issues that arise in their personal lives. Law graduates also extolled the extent to which their studies helped hone their analytical and critical thinking skills.

But in spite of this positive view of a law degree’s extended usefulness, the challenges of the Great Recession were apparent. Study participants who graduated law school during or after the recession were less likely than earlier law school graduates to find satisfactory employment within one year of graduation. Not surprisingly, these graduates were also less likely to state that their law degree was worth the cost. We observed similar trends among graduates who amassed large amounts of student loan debt to finance their legal education.

In short, while a law degree is still held in high esteem, it is now seen as a riskier investment than in the past. The law encompasses everything we do, and lawyers are stewards of the legal process. Therefore, understanding the factors that underlie perceptions of legal education — the predominant pathway into the legal profession — is important to legal educators, to the legal profession and to society. We are happy to have partnered with Gallup to conduct this important study.



# 01

## Executive Summary



By 2019, over 3 million Americans will be enrolled in a graduate program.<sup>1</sup> This is an important and difficult choice for most students, given the time, money and uncertain job prospects associated with advanced degrees. The decision to attend law school is particularly challenging, as student loan burden and job market competitiveness have increased significantly since the end of the Great Recession. Furthermore, as noted by the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being, the legal profession is “at a crossroads” caused by a dwindling market share, waning public confidence and mental health issues among lawyers.<sup>2</sup> These challenges call for a closer examination of the value of a law degree and its unique offerings compared with other advanced degrees.

The Gallup-AccessLex Institute study of Juris Doctor (J.D.) degree holders provides important insights for educators, employers, law school alumni and prospective students about the factors that contribute to great jobs, lives and experiences for law school graduates. A law degree is one of the most valuable advanced degrees as evaluated by law graduates and other degree holders. As described in the key findings, most law graduates strongly agree that they would still get a J.D. if given the opportunity to go back and do it all over again. Furthermore, nearly half strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost. While many recent law graduates have negative views of the J.D., graduates who are more advanced in their careers tend to have higher levels of well-being and more positive assessments of the value of a J.D.

### Key findings include:

- 1 College graduates view a J.D. as one of the most valuable advanced degrees.** While a doctor of medicine degree is widely viewed as the most valuable advanced degree, nearly nine in 10 adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher view a J.D. as either very valuable (47%) or valuable (41%). J.D. holders view the degree even more positively than those who don’t hold a J.D., and 59% of J.D. holders would recommend the degree to other people like them.
- 2 Most J.D. holders had a positive experience in law school.** Over half (52%) of all J.D. holders strongly agree that if they could go back and do it all over again, they would still get a law degree. Those who accrued higher student loan debt to obtain their law degree are less likely to strongly agree. Among those with the most debt — over \$100,000 in 2016 dollars — 42% strongly agree they would make the same decision.

1 McFarland, J., Hussar, B., de Brey, C., Snyder, T., Wang, X., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., ... Hinz, S. (2017). *The condition of education 2017* (NCES 2017-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017144>

2 National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being. (2017). *The path to lawyer well-being: Practical recommendations for positive change*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/images/abanews/ThePathToLawyerWellBeingReportRevFINAL.pdf>

**3 Low valuations of a J.D. degree are driven by student loan burden and graduation timing.** Less than half (48%) of all J.D. holders strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost. Among those with over \$100,000 in debt, only 23% strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost. Additionally, law graduates who obtained their degree during or after the Great Recession are much less likely to strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost, even when controlling for the amount they borrowed to obtain their degree.

**4 Job-related assistance provided by their university is directly related to how graduates evaluate the value of their degree.** Two-thirds of those who report that their law school was very helpful in getting them a job upon graduation also strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost. By contrast, just 19% of those who describe their law school as very unhelpful in getting them a job consider the degree worth the cost. Surprisingly, having a practical experience in law school does not increase the odds that J.D. holders evaluate their degree positively. Nor does it increase the likelihood that they obtained jobs more quickly upon graduation.

**5 While recent law graduates spend more time in the job market, most J.D. holders find a good job before graduating law school.** Over half (51%) of all J.D. holders had a good job waiting for them when they graduated from law school. This rate jumps to 71% for students who finished in the top 10% of their class but falls to 30% for students who finished outside of the top 33%. Post-recession law graduates have a harder time obtaining a good job: 44% had one waiting for them at graduation, but 26% had to wait over a year.

**6 J.D. holders are as likely as those with another type of advanced degree to be engaged in their work.** Forty-three percent of J.D. holders who are employed are engaged at work, i.e., intellectually and emotionally connected with their organizations and work teams. Among those practicing law for their profession, 42% are engaged at work. Patterns of engagement are similar across degree holders: 42% of other advanced degree holders and 44% of those with a bachelor's degree only are engaged.

**7 Law school graduates have the highest levels of community well-being, compared with other college graduates and advanced degree holders.** However, J.D. holders lag behind those with other advanced degrees, but outpace or tie those with a bachelor's degree only, in purpose, social and physical well-being. Law graduates are less likely than those with a bachelor's degree only and other advanced degrees to have thriving financial well-being. This is likely driven by high levels of student debt among recent law graduates; student loan debt has a direct impact on financial well-being.<sup>3</sup> As J.D. holders become more experienced, overall well-being tends to improve; more than 20% of those who graduated before 1990 are thriving in all five elements of well-being, compared with just 5% of those who graduated after 2009.

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3 Dugan, A., & Kafka, S. (2014, August 7). Student debt linked to worse health and less wealth. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/poll/174317/student-debt-linked-worse-health-less-wealth.aspx>

# 02

## Introduction

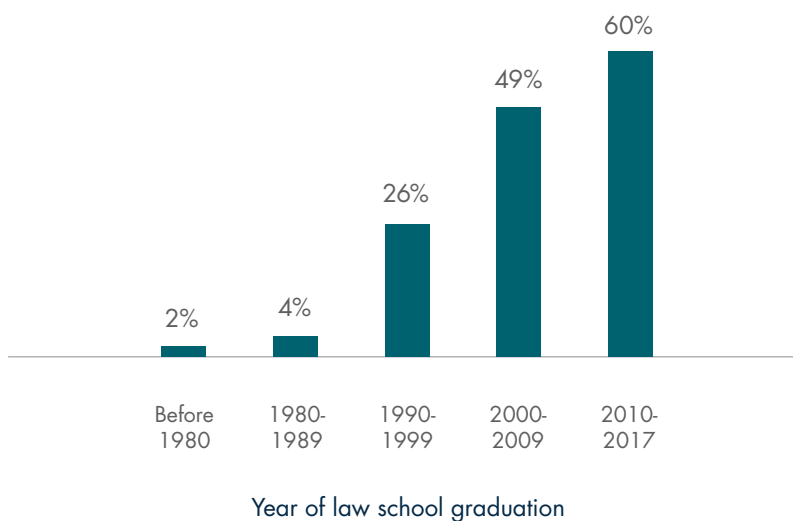


The costs of pursuing a college degree have risen dramatically over the past decade. Tuition and fees have increased more than 60% since 2006.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, only 21% of U.S. adults think that a college education is affordable.<sup>5</sup> For those interested in an advanced degree, the cumulative price tag has raised the stakes significantly. Many students spend a substantial amount of money to obtain their undergraduate degree and then face increasingly steep costs to obtain a graduate degree.

Between 2000 and 2013, average tuition and fees nearly doubled at private law schools and tripled for resident J.D. students at public universities.<sup>6</sup> These increases have resulted in larger student loan debt burdens for recent law school graduates, compared with student loan debt burdens in previous decades. Sixty percent of those who completed their J.D. in 2010 or later report borrowing more than \$100,000 to obtain their degree, compared with around half of those who graduated in the 2000s and a quarter of law graduates in the 1990s.

Figure 1

Percentage of law graduates who borrowed more than \$100,000 in student loans for law school



Student loans inflated to 2016 U.S. dollars.

4 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2016). College tuition and fees increase 63 percent since January 2006. *The Economics Daily*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/college-tuition-and-fees-increase-63-percent-since-january-2006.htm>

5 Busteed, B., & Kafka, S. (2015, April 16). Most Americans say higher education not affordable. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/poll/182441/americans-say-higher-education-not-affordable.aspx>

6 American Bar Association, Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar. (2013). *Law school tuition (1985-2013; public/private)*. Retrieved from [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_education/resources/statistics.html](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/statistics.html)

Additionally, J.D. holders who graduated during or after the Great Recession face a more competitive job market than their older peers. Among law students who graduated in 2009 or later, one-fourth took more than a year to obtain a good job. Only 10% of earlier graduates required that length of time to secure a quality job after law school. Higher costs and difficulty finding good jobs have raised the question about the true value of a law degree. Conventional estimates of the value of a law degree use traditional economic metrics, such as employment rates and income amounts. While these are important factors in evaluating the return on investment for graduates, they do not fully capture the value of an education — and specifically, a legal education, which more appropriately includes an examination of individual well-being, employee engagement and perceptions of degree utility.

In 2017, AccessLex Institute partnered with Gallup to quantify the value of a law degree by comparing assessments from J.D. holders with those of others who received a bachelor's degree only or some other advanced degree. This research builds on the 2015 Gallup-AccessLex Institute *Life After Law School* study, which examined long-term outcomes among alumni from seven law schools in the southeastern U.S.

Results in this report are based on interviews with 10,715 U.S. adults with a bachelor's degree or higher who received their degree from a U.S. institution between 1941 and 2017. Gallup also moderated four focus groups with J.D. holders in Boston, Massachusetts, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Additionally, Gallup conducted 25 in-depth interviews with J.D. and other advanced degree holders from around the country who work in a variety of settings to learn more about their experiences and how they think about the value of their advanced degree. Gallup conducted the online survey July 31-August 24, 2017, and the in-depth interviews August 31-September 21, 2017.

Gallup interviewed 723 graduates who have a bachelor's degree only, 1,947 who completed some graduate work but did not earn a degree and 8,045 who have an advanced degree. Of the advanced degree holders, 631 are *J.D. holders only*, while 182 hold a J.D. and another advanced degree. For this analysis, J.D. holders with another type of advanced degree are included in the J.D. holder group. *Other advanced degree holders* include those with a Master of Arts/Master of Science, Master of Business Administration, other master's degrees (e.g., Master of Public Policy, Master of Social Work), doctor of medicine, other health science degrees, doctor of philosophy, theology degrees, and any other postgraduate degree or certificate.

This study provides new insights that may help those in higher education and in the legal profession improve the value of a law degree. It shows which interventions are most valuable to law graduates, such as well-resourced placement services. Furthermore, this study helps current and prospective law students make better-informed choices about how to maximize the value of their degree.



# 03

## Making Law School Worth It

College graduates face tough choices when deciding whether to pursue an advanced degree. The increased costs associated with obtaining a prerequisite degree and then an advanced degree require careful examination of the outcomes. A growing percentage of J.D. holders at least consider other types of degrees. Of those who considered a different degree, 37% thought about obtaining a Master of Business Administration degree, while 36% considered pursuing a Ph.D. Sixty-three percent of J.D. holders who completed their degree in 2000 or later have considered pursuing a different degree at some point, compared with 51% of earlier law school graduates. This indicates that recent law students are more likely to have considered alternative degrees and career paths than ever before.

### J.D. Viewed as One of the Most Valuable Advanced Degrees

Nearly all U.S. adults with a bachelor's degree or higher rate a J.D. as a very valuable (47%) or valuable (41%) degree in today's job market. The only advanced degree rated higher is doctor of medicine (M.D.), with 80% rating it very valuable and 18% rating it valuable. Compared with its main competitor degrees, more people rate a J.D. as very valuable. Forty percent rate an MBA as very valuable, and 31% rate a Ph.D. as very valuable.

Figure 2

Based on what you have seen, heard or experienced, how valuable is each of the following degrees in today's job market?

	% Very valuable	% Valuable	% Not too valuable	% Not at all valuable
M.D.	80	18	1	1
B.A./B.S.	59	32	8	1
J.D.	47	41	10	2
MBA	40	48	11	2
Ph.D.	31	51	16	2
M.A./M.S.	30	53	15	2

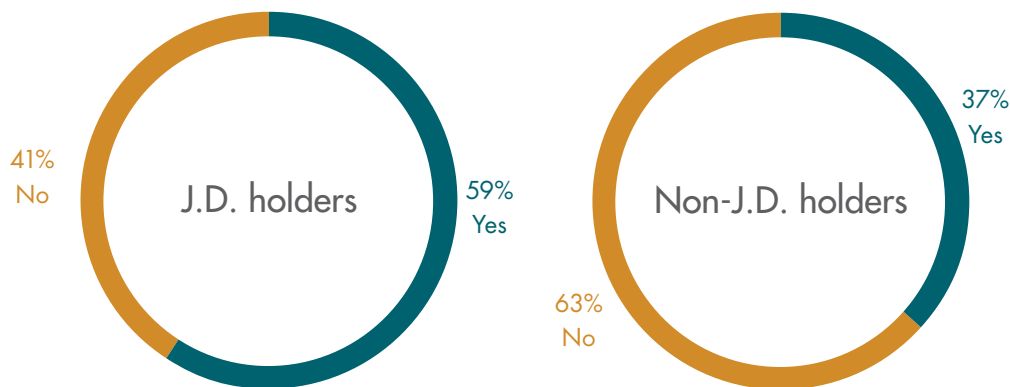
Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Job Market Prevents Many From Recommending Law School

A majority of those who hold a bachelor’s degree or higher but not a J.D. (*non-J.D. holders*) would advise others against pursuing a law degree. Only 37% of non-J.D. holders — versus 59% of J.D. holders — would recommend obtaining a J.D. to other people like them. Among J.D. holders, recent graduates are less likely to recommend law school. Fifty-three percent of those who graduated during or after the Great Recession (2009-2017) would recommend obtaining a law degree.

Figure 3

Would you recommend obtaining a law degree to other people like you?



Among those who would not recommend a J.D., job market doubt is the most common reason they give; 45% of J.D. holders and 37% of those without a law degree cite this as the main reason they would not recommend a law degree. The second most common reason J.D. holders would not recommend a law degree is the cost of the degree (28%). However, this is the primary reason cited by post-recession graduates (47%) for not recommending law school. Among J.D. holders and non-J.D. holders (20% and 21%, respectively), work/life balance remains among the three most commonly reported reasons why they would not recommend the degree to others.

Figure 4

Which of the following best describes the main reason you would not recommend a law degree to other people like you?

Among those who did not recommend obtaining a J.D.

	J.D. holders	Non-J.D. holders
% Job market for J.D. holders	45	37
% Cost of a law degree	28	14
% Work/Life balance	20	21
% Current salary levels/benefits for J.D. holders	5	4
% The reputations lawyers have	1	19
% The total time required to complete the degree	1	4
% The difficulty of law school	0	2

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

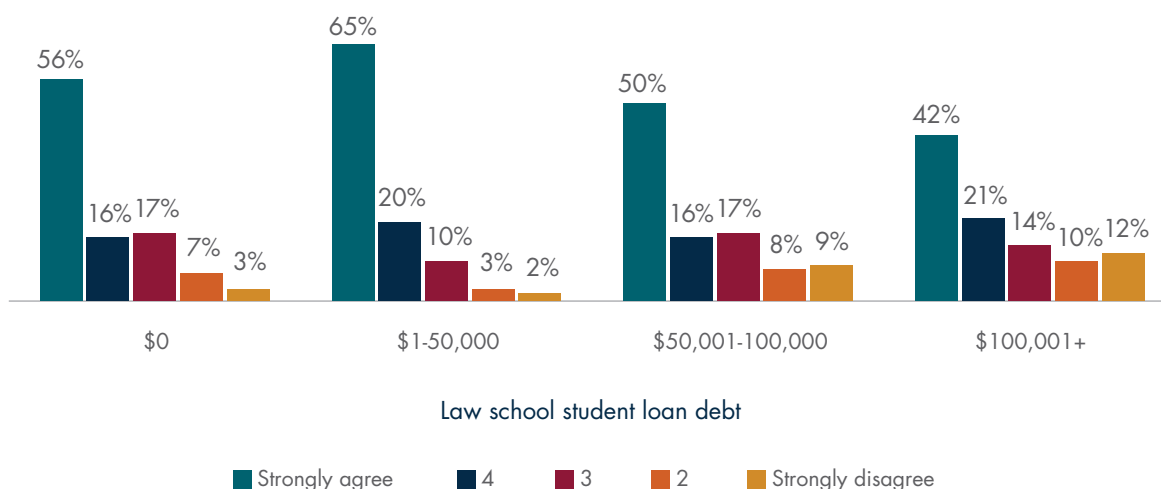
## Most Law Graduates Have Positive Evaluations of a J.D.

Over half (52%) of all J.D. holders strongly agree that if they could go back and do it all over again, they would still get a law degree. Only 7% strongly disagree with this statement, suggesting that very few law graduates have serious regrets about pursuing their J.D.

Those who accrued higher student loan debt to obtain their degree are less likely to strongly agree with this statement. Among those with the most law school debt — over \$100,000 in 2016 dollars — 42% strongly agree that they would make the same decision. These results are similar to previously reported relationships between student loan debt and the perceived value of a degree for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. This suggests that student debt's slight dampening effect on perceived value is consistent across degree types.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 5

If I could go back and do it all over again, I would still get a law degree.



Student loans inflated to 2016 U.S. dollars. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Similar trends emerge when J.D. holders assess the monetary value of their degree. Slightly less than half (48%) of all J.D. holders strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost. Yet, a mere 4% strongly disagree with this statement, indicating that very few law graduates found no worth in their degree.

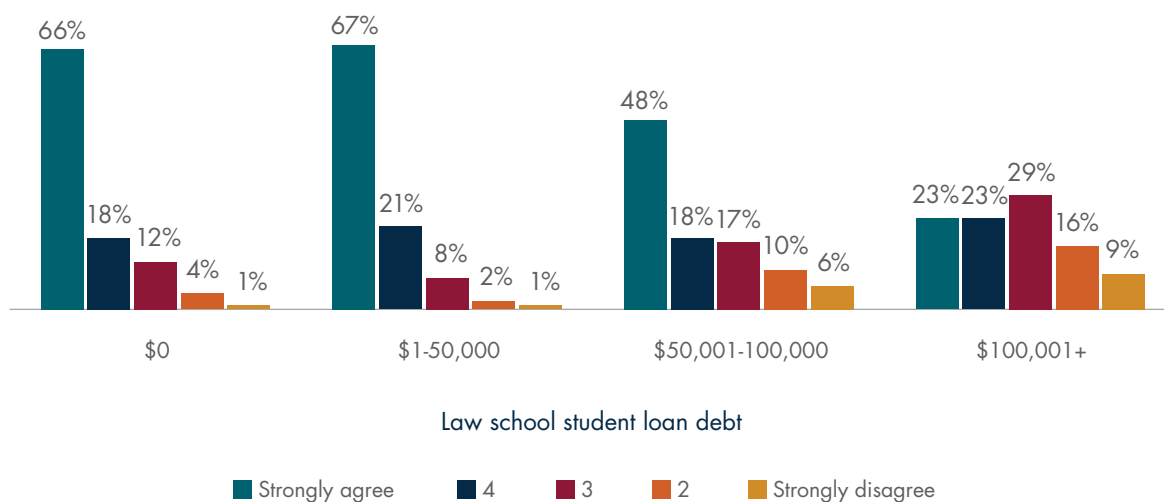
Not surprisingly, assessments of a law degree's worth are highly dependent on the graduate's student loan burden from law school. Law graduates with higher student loan debt are much more likely to have lower valuations of their degree (see Figure 6). Among those with the most debt — over \$100,000 in 2016 dollars — only 23% strongly agree their J.D. degree was worth the cost. In contrast, a majority of graduates with a lower amount of debt strongly agree with this statement.

*"I actually was accepted to two other schools that gave me full scholarships, and I chose to go to my program because I thought, of the three, they had the best reputation. And — wish I hadn't made that decision now because I wouldn't be paying so much money every month. But that was a deciding factor."*  
— J.D. holder, aged 25-36

<sup>7</sup> Gallup. (2015). *Gallup-Purdue Index 2015 report*. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/reports/197144/gallup-purdue-index-report-2015.aspx>

Figure 6

My law degree from my college/university was worth the cost.



Student loans inflated to 2016 U.S. dollars. Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Student loans have a strong negative effect on assessments of a law degree's worth, even when controlling for a variety of factors, including gender, race, income, first-generation status, being a practicing lawyer, practicing in a firm and having failed a bar exam.

Year of graduation is the other main driver of J.D. holders' assessments of their degree's value. Students who graduated during or after the Great Recession are less likely than earlier graduates to strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost, even when controlling for student debt. This trend is consistent with Gallup's findings that undergraduate students who received their degree after 2006 are also less likely to believe that their degree was worth the cost.<sup>8</sup>

Pre-recession law graduates are

**3.7x**

more likely to strongly agree that their law degree was worth the cost.

Pre-recession law graduates are

**1.4x**

more likely to strongly agree that they would still get a J.D. if they could do it all over again.

## Law School Performance and Job Assistance Improve Degree Value

Law graduates who report strong academic performance are much more likely to find value in their degree (see Figure 7). Sixty-six percent of those ranked in the top 10% of their class — versus 46% of those in the top third of their class — strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost. This notable difference suggests that simply holding a J.D. is not enough. Instead, performing strongly in law school is a key contributor to also finding value in the degree.

<sup>8</sup> Gallup. [2015]. *Gallup-Purdue Index 2015 report*. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/reports/197144/gallup-purdue-index-report-2015.aspx>

Figure 7

My law degree from my college/university was worth the cost.

% Strongly agree, by final class ranking (self-reported)

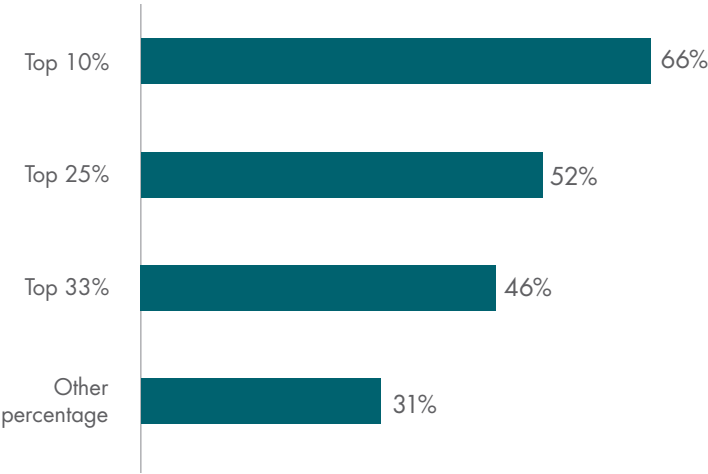


Figure 8

My law degree was worth the cost.

By perceptions of helpfulness of college/university in helping find a job

	% Strongly agree
Very helpful	66
Helpful	45
Neither helpful/unhelpful	47
Unhelpful	22
Very unhelpful	19

However, perceptions of value are not just driven by individual performance in the classroom. Law graduates are much more likely to report that their degree was worth the cost if their law school helped them find a job. Such an investment is important: 66% of J.D. holders strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost when their law school was very helpful in finding them a job. However, just 28% of J.D. holders report that their school was very helpful in finding a job upon graduation. Thus, there is significant room for law schools to improve their placement efforts and thereby increase perceptions of value of a law degree.

Previous Gallup research has demonstrated a direct relationship at the undergraduate level between students engaging in a practical experience and strongly agreeing their education was worth the cost.<sup>9</sup> Among U.S. adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher, the odds of their strongly agreeing that their degree was worth the cost are 1.5 times higher if they participated in a job or internship that allowed them to apply what they were learning in the classroom during their undergraduate experience.

Most J.D. holders participated in a practical experience in law school. Seventy-four percent of all law graduates took part in a co-op program, internship or practicum. These experiences have become nearly universal in recent years, with a 91% participation rate among J.D. holders who graduated after 2009. In this context, practical experiences do not have a significant impact on key outcomes for law graduates. J.D. holders who participated in a co-op program, internship or practicum while enrolled in law school were not more likely to strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost. Furthermore, J.D. holders with one of these practical experiences were not any more likely to have a good job waiting for them when they graduated from law school, compared with those who did not have a practical experience.

<sup>9</sup> Gallup. (2015). *Gallup-Purdue Index 2015 report*. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/reports/197144/gallup-purdue-index-report-2015.aspx>



Motivations for Entering Law School Affect Perceived Value

Individuals’ motivations for attending law school influence their assessment of their law degree’s value. Those who saw a J.D. as the path to a high-paying job are the least likely to view law school as worth the cost, with just 39% strongly agreeing it was. Forty-four percent of those who believed that a law degree would make them competitive in the job market strongly agree that law school was worth the cost.

In contrast, more than half of law graduates strongly agree that their degree was worth the cost if they attended law school to be their own boss, if someone they knew advised them to obtain a J.D. or if they believed that the skills they obtained in law school could apply to a wide range of jobs.

*“Only go if it’s a calling or passion, and then only go if you have a realistic plan to pay for it without getting yourself into too much debt, because if you have that much debt, it’s an anchor around your neck.”*  
— J.D. holder, aged 37-65

Figure 9  
Law degree was worth the cost.  
By main motivation for attending law school

	% Strongly agree
You wanted to be your own boss	60
Someone you know advised/recommended that you obtain a law degree	55
You believed the skills you would obtain through a law degree could be applicable in a wide range of jobs	53
You had always wanted to obtain a law degree	50
Your family member(s) obtained a law degree	49
The job you wanted required a law degree	46
You believed a law degree would allow you to help others/contribute to society	44
You believed a law degree would make you competitive in the job market	44
You believed a law degree would help you get a high-paying job	39

# 04

## FINDING A GOOD JOB

# After Law School

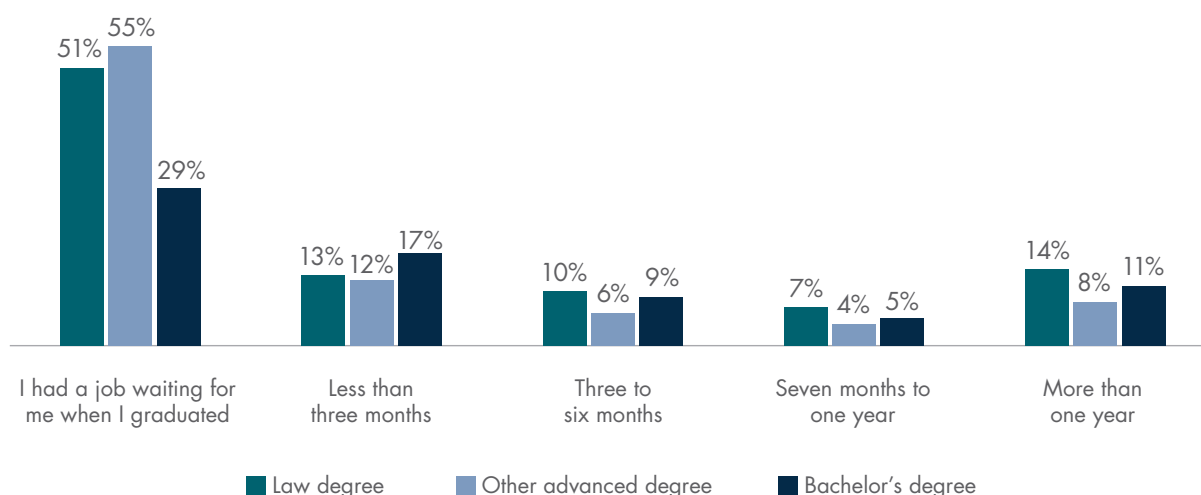


Overall, a majority (51%) of J.D. holders report that they had a good job waiting for them when they graduated. This rate is comparable to those who hold other advanced degrees and is nearly double the rate for those whose highest level of education is a bachelor's degree.

Figure 10

About how long did it take for you to obtain a good job after you completed your degree from your college/university?

By degree obtained

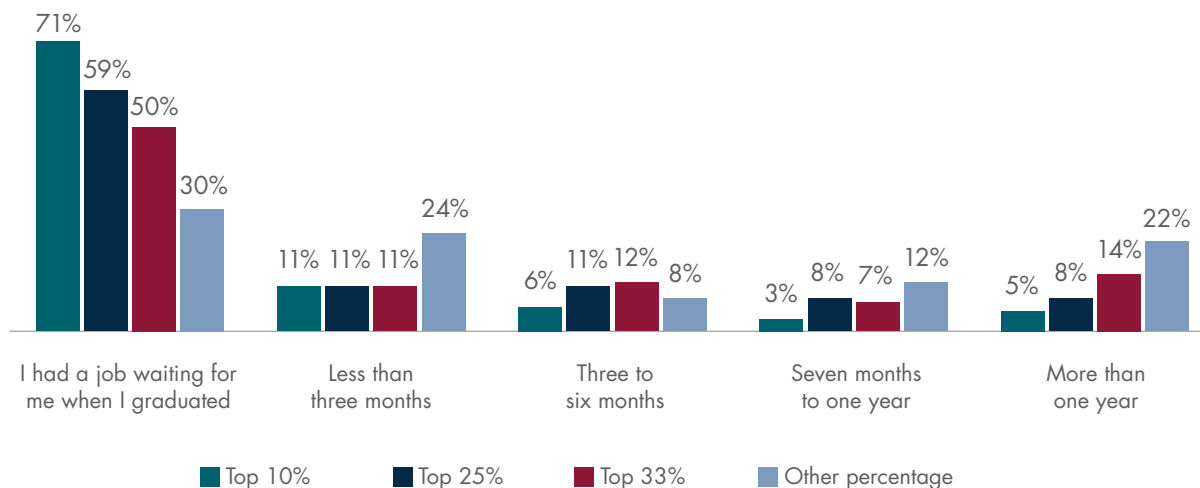


For law graduates, the time it takes to obtain a good job after graduation is highly dependent on academic performance (see Figure 11). Among those who were in the top 10% of their class, 71% had a job waiting for them when they graduated. In contrast, only 30% of those who finished outside the top 33% had a good job waiting for them upon receiving their law degree. Moreover, nearly a quarter (22%) of those who did not graduate in the top 33% had to search over a year to obtain a good job.

Figure 11

About how long did it take for you to obtain a good job after you completed your law degree from your college/university?

By final class ranking



Recent law graduates report taking more time to find a job than those who graduated law school before the Great Recession (see Figure 12). Only 44% of those who graduated in 2009 or later had a job awaiting them when they graduated, versus 53% of those who graduated before 2009. Furthermore, 26% of the recent graduate group — versus 10% of the earlier graduates — say it took more than a year to obtain a good job.

*"I graduated in 2011. I think a lot of us didn't know that, at the time, the legal market just kind of fell through. So I know a lot of people who came out a decade, five years earlier — they walked into much better jobs. And I don't think anybody could have seen it coming. Certainly if I had, I wouldn't have done it. I think the legal education system now is reflecting that."*

*— J.D. holder, aged 25-36*

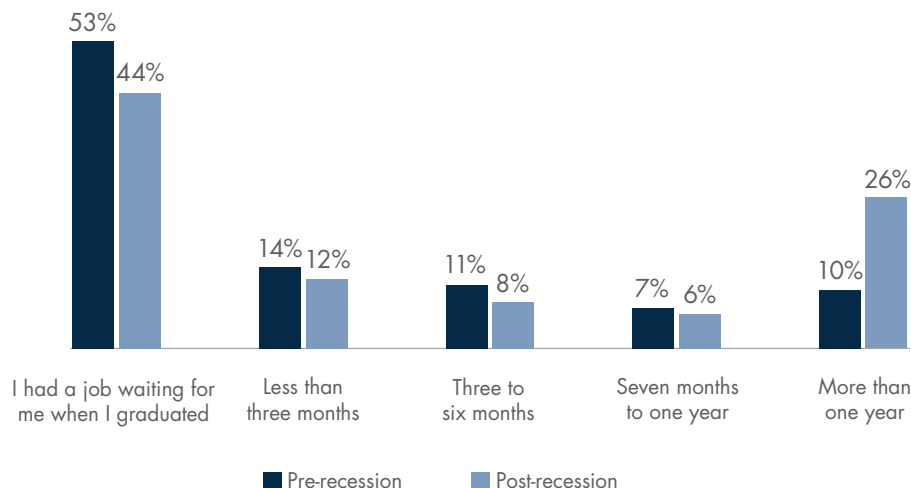
*"It used to be that they would post a listing for 20 attorneys. And they would get a hundred applicants — maybe 200 if it was a really good pool. There were a thousand applicants for the 20 spots that I was hired in. This happens to be my dream job. But I'm telling you, not all thousand people thought that this is their dream job."*

*— J.D. holder, aged 25-36*

Figure 12

About how long did it take for you to obtain a good job after you completed your law degree from your college/university?

By graduation date

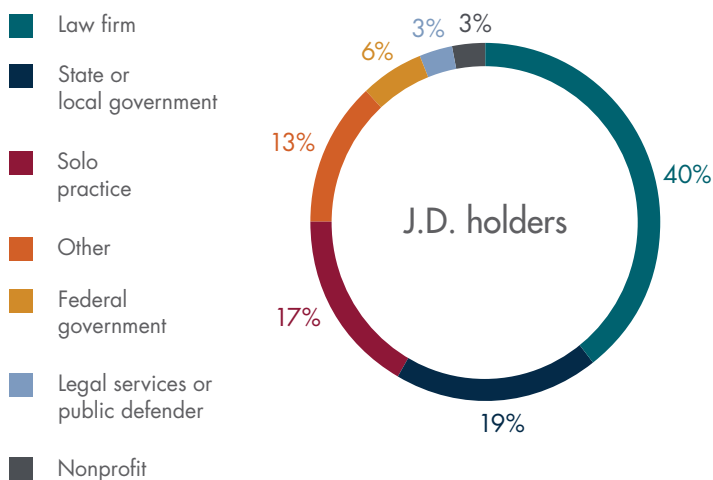


The majority (63%) of J.D. holders are practicing law. Among all practicing lawyers, most practice in law firms. However, a significant number are employed by local, state or federal government.

Figure 13

Current work setting

Among those currently practicing law



*"I would love to have continued as a public defender. I loved the clinic I did. I found it gratifying. I found that I was an advocate, but I can't make \$45,000 or even \$50,000 or even \$55,000. So I felt absolutely forced down sort of the more corporate path."*  
 — J.D. holder, aged 25-36

The two most common primary reasons why J.D. holders in the workforce are not practicing law are that they were dissatisfied with the work/life balance when they were practicing law (16%) and that they did not like practicing law (15%). Only 4% cited dissatisfaction with the pay or benefits for practicing law (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

## Which of the following best describes the MAIN reason you are not currently practicing law?

Among J.D. holders not currently practicing law

	Total %
You retired	24
You were dissatisfied with the work/life balance available when practicing law	16
You did not like practicing law	15
You could not find a job practicing law	5
You are studying for the bar exam/have not received your results yet	5
You did not pass the bar exam	4
You were dissatisfied with the pay or benefits for practicing law	4
You became a judge	2
Your license was suspended or you were disbarred	1

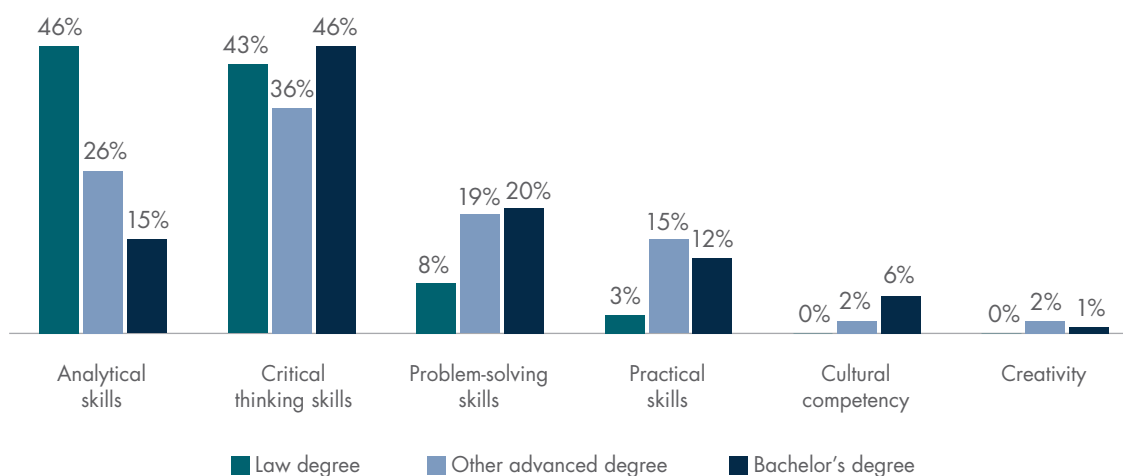
Whether or not J.D. holders are practicing law has little effect on whether they strongly agree that their law degree was worth the cost. Fifty-one percent of non-practicing J.D. holders versus 48% of practicing J.D. holders strongly agree that their law degree was worth the cost.

This perception of value could be attributed to the one clear advantage law graduates have when they enter the workforce outside of the legal profession: strong analytical skills. When asked about the most important skill students develop during their degree program, nearly half of J.D. holders cite analytical skills and critical thinking skills. Analytical skills, in particular, are perceived as a major strength of a legal education. Law graduates are much more likely to say analytical skills are the most important among those developed during their degree program, compared with other advanced degree holders and those with a bachelor's degree only.

Figure 15

## Which of the following is the most important skill students develop during their degree program?

By degree obtained





## Employee Engagement Is High Among All Degree Holders

While employment rates, student loan debt and other traditional economic metrics are important to understand the outcomes of J.D. holders, their engagement in their work is equally important. Workplace engagement is more than job satisfaction. It encompasses employees being intellectually and emotionally connected to their organizations and work teams because when they are at work, they can do what they do best, they like what they do and they have someone who cares about their development.

There are few significant differences in the engagement patterns of J.D. holders and other advanced degree holders. At the national level, J.D. holders and other graduate degree holders have similar levels of engagement, and very few are actively disengaged. Furthermore, those who hold a bachelor's degree only have the highest levels of engagement, but this group also has the highest percentage of actively disengaged employees.

The workplace engagement levels of practicing lawyers do not differ significantly from the engagement levels of all J.D. holders. Forty-two percent of practicing lawyers are engaged at work.

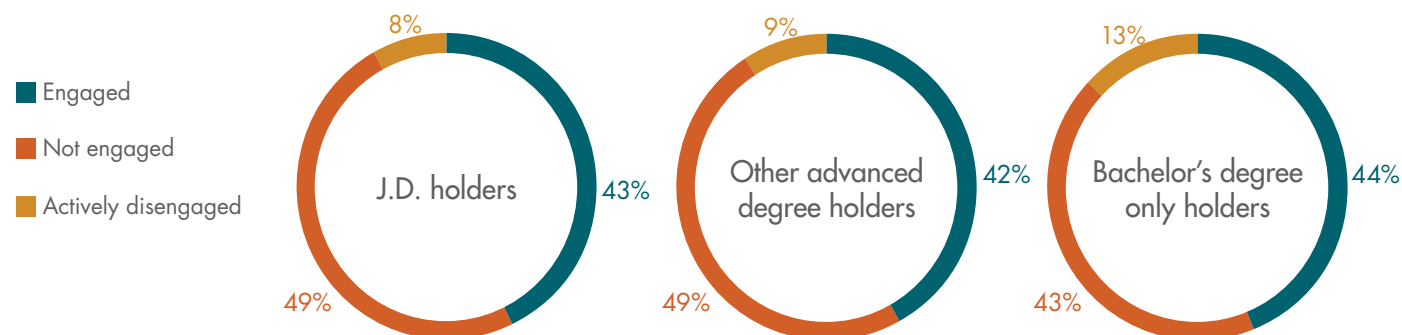
*Gallup's expertise on engagement in the workplace is rooted in more than 30 years of research on the 12 elements that best predict employee and workgroup performance. Based on responses to items that measure 12 elements of the workplace, Gallup categorizes workers as engaged, not engaged or actively disengaged.*

*People who are engaged at work are more involved in and enthusiastic about their work. They are loyal and productive. Those who are not engaged may be productive and satisfied with their workplaces, but they are not intellectually and emotionally connected to them. Workers who are actively disengaged are physically present but intellectually and emotionally disconnected. They are unhappy with their work, share their unhappiness with their colleagues and are likely to jeopardize the performance of their teams.*

Figure 16

### Employee engagement, by degree obtained

Among those currently employed by an employer



# 05

PREPARING LAW GRADUATES FOR

## Challenges Outside the Workplace



Many law graduates report significant benefits from their J.D. degree in their daily life. When asked whether the curriculum they experienced in law school helped prepare them to handle financial, legal or other issues that come up in their personal life, 41% strongly agree. In contrast, only 32% of those with another type of advanced degree say the same.

The curriculum I experienced during my education prepared me well to handle financial, legal or other issues that come up in my personal life.

41%

of J.D. holders  
strongly agree

32%

of other advanced  
degree holders  
strongly agree

33%

of bachelor's  
degree holders  
strongly agree

*"Law school definitely teaches you how to think, how to advocate. I find it very beneficial in my everyday life because I know how to speak to people. When you've got to call your insurance company because they're deciding something, well, I know how to read the contract and I know how to reference this section with that definition. I can speak to those things in a way that is more persuasive."*

*— J.D. holder, aged 37-65*

*"Law school teaches us to be problem solvers ... that it doesn't really matter which situation you're thrust into. So even if it's something that we have no idea about, it might be something that was mentioned in passing in law school, or something we never even studied at all. But we can figure it out."*

*— J.D. holder, aged 25-36*

## Well-Being

Well-being is not only about being happy or wealthy, nor is it synonymous with physical health only. Rather, it is about the interaction and interdependency among many aspects of life, such as finding fulfillment in daily work and interactions, having strong social relationships and access to necessary resources, feeling financially secure, being physically healthy, and taking part in a true community.

Gallup and Sharecare developed the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index to measure the important aspects of a life well-lived. The index, which is based on decades of Gallup and Sharecare global research, uses 10 questions to measure well-being in five interrelated elements:

**Purpose Well-Being:** Liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals

**Social Well-Being:** Having strong and supportive relationships and love in your life

**Financial Well-Being:** Managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security

**Community Well-Being:** Liking where you live, feeling safe and having pride in your community

**Physical Well-Being:** Having good health and enough energy to get things done daily

Gallup categorizes individuals as “thriving,” “struggling” or “suffering” in each element according to how they respond to the questions that relate to that facet of their well-being:

**Thriving:** Well-being that is strong and consistent in a particular element

**Struggling:** Well-being that is moderate or inconsistent in a particular element

**Suffering:** Well-being that is low and inconsistent in a particular element

## J.D. Holders Thrive in Fewer Areas of Well-Being

Thirteen percent of J.D. holders are thriving in all five elements — purpose, social, financial, community and physical. This matches the percentage among those with a bachelor’s degree only, though it falls short of the 17% among those with another type of advanced degree.

Overall well-being for law graduates is positively associated with age and experience. Over 20% of J.D. holders who graduated before 1990 are thriving in all five elements, compared with just 5% of those who graduated after 2009.

While J.D. holders lag behind those with another type of advanced degree in four of the five elements, they also trail those with a bachelor’s degree only in financial well-being (see Figure 17). Given the perception of a J.D. as a valuable degree, the latter finding is surprising but likely reflects the poor job market and high debt levels many law graduates face.

Figure 17

**Well-Being***By degree obtained*

Well-being element	J.D. holders	Other advanced degree holders	Bachelor's degree only holders
<b>Purpose Well-Being</b>			
% Thriving	54	63	54
% Struggling	40	31	36
% Suffering	6	6	10
<b>Social Well-Being</b>			
% Thriving	55	57	55
% Struggling	38	36	34
% Suffering	7	7	11
<b>Financial Well-Being</b>			
% Thriving	48	56	51
% Struggling	35	31	33
% Suffering	17	13	16
<b>Community Well-Being</b>			
% Thriving	55	53	51
% Struggling	38	37	38
% Suffering	7	10	11
<b>Physical Well-Being</b>			
% Thriving	35	41	31
% Struggling	56	52	60
% Suffering	9	7	8

*Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.*

Among degree holders, J.D. holders have the highest percentage with thriving community well-being (55%). This indicates that while they may have similar or lower well-being than other degree holders in most areas, a majority of J.D. holders like where they live and take part in their community.

Well-being trends among J.D. holders vary between those who are practicing law and those who are not, such as those who have retired, become a judge or work in a different industry. Most notably, 55% of non-practicing J.D. holders have thriving financial well-being, versus 43% of practicing lawyers. With 74% of post-recession law graduates practicing law, this finding may be shaped in part by the job market and student loan repayment pressures recent graduates face as new attorneys. Also, more non-practicing than practicing J.D. holders have thriving purpose well-being (59% vs. 51%, respectively), which indicates that more law graduates like what they do every day when they are outside of the legal profession.

# 06

## Implications



In the United States, there have been important changes in higher education and the economy since the Great Recession. A law degree has remained one of the most valuable advanced degrees as evaluated by J.D. holders and other degree holders alike. However, the difficulties that the most recent graduates face may be undermining its reputation. Recent graduates are least likely to find their degree valuable, even when controlling for student loan debt. Whether this is because of the challenges of being an early-career lawyer or the post-recession job market, there is significant pessimism among the newest class of J.D. holders.

However, law schools can increase the value of a law degree. Graduates are much more likely to consider their degree highly valuable when their school played an active part in helping them get a job upon graduation. While there are a number of factors to consider, this suggests that law schools should reinforce and expand their placement efforts whenever possible.

Furthermore, law schools should do a better job of setting expectations for what a law degree can do for a person, such as build skills that help in a number of careers and in life, not just law. Those who enter law school primarily to obtain a high-paying job are least likely to rate their degree as highly valuable. Therefore, to increase satisfaction with a J.D. degree, schools must ensure that prospective students have accurate information about the job market, the costs of obtaining a degree and placement information broken down by class ranking.

The biggest area of concern is well-being among J.D. holders. In most areas of well-being, this group trails other advanced degree holders and those who have a bachelor's degree only. Purpose and financial well-being are most concerning. Law graduates significantly trail other advanced degree holders in liking what they do every day. Furthermore, they outpace those who hold only a bachelor's degree in financial stress and insecurity. These are key areas that law schools and the legal profession as a whole need to address. If many J.D. holders do not find purpose in their work and lack financial security, more and more will be discouraged from entering the field.

Building on the pilot study conducted in 2015, this 2017 study by Gallup and AccessLex Institute provides important new insights into the true value of a law degree and the potential challenges degree holders face. Armed with this information, law schools, policymakers and industry leaders can help address these key issues and help future law students avoid potential pitfalls.



# 07

## Methodology



Results for the Gallup-Accesslex Institute study, *Examining Value, Measuring Engagement: A National Study of the Long-Term Outcomes of a Law Degree*, are based on web surveys conducted July 31-August 24, 2017, with a random sample of 10,715 respondents with a bachelor's degree or higher, aged 18 and older, with internet access, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The sample included 723 graduates with a bachelor's degree only (no postgraduate work), 813 with a J.D. degree and 7,232 with another type of postgraduate degree only.

Respondents were selected via Gallup's proprietary recontact database. Sample members were originally identified using probability-based methods, including address-based sampling (ABS) and random-digit-dial (RDD) sampling methods. U.S. adults with the necessary education level and who agreed to future contact were randomly selected for participation in this study.

Interviews were conducted via the web in English only. Samples are weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent Current Population Survey figures for the U.S. population aged 18 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher.

For results based on the 723 U.S. adults with a bachelor's degree only, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 5.3$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on the 813 U.S. adults with a law degree, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 5.2$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on the 7,232 U.S. adults with an advanced degree (excluding a J.D.), the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 1.7$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

The reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.



EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LAWYERS®

### **About AccessLex Institute®**

AccessLex Institute, in partnership with its nearly 200 nonprofit and state-affiliated ABA-approved Member law schools, has been committed to improving access to legal education and to maximizing the affordability and value of a law degree since 1983. The AccessLex Center for Legal Education Excellence® advocates for policies that make legal education work better for students and society alike and conducts research on the most critical issues facing legal education today. The AccessLex Center for Education and Financial Capability® offers on-campus and online financial education programming and resources to help students confidently manage their finances on their way to achieving personal and professional success. AccessLex Institute is a nonprofit organization with offices in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., and with accredited financial counselors throughout the U.S.

# GALLUP®

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Gallup delivers forward-thinking research, analytics and advice to help leaders solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 75 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of the world's constituents, employees and customers than any other organization. Gallup consultants help private and public sector organizations boost organic growth through measurement tools, strategic advice and education. Gallup's 2,000 professionals deliver services at client organizations through the web and in nearly 40 offices around the world.